DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 267 FL 007 651

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TITLE An Error Analysis of an Advanced Learner of ESL: The Importance of the Monitor. Working Papers on Bilingualism, No. 7.
INSTITUTION Ontario Inst. for Studies in Education, Toronto. Bilingual Education Project.
PUB DATE Sep 75
NOTE 6p.; For related documents, see FL 007 646-650

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Learning; *Cognitive Processes; *English (Second Language); *Error Patterns; Interference (Language Learning); Language Fluency; Language Instruction; *Language Proficiency; *Learning Processes; Oral Communication; *Second Language Learning; Written Language
IDENTIFIERS *Error Analysis

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on a native speaker of Chinese, in her 40's, who began to learn English in her late 20's when she emigrated to the United States. It was discovered that the subject was able to self-correct nearly every error she made in casual speech when the errors were pointed out to her after their commission. Furthermore, in nearly every case she was able to describe the grammatical principle involved. It is speculated that if second language users are able to apply such conscious rules when sufficient processing time is available, perhaps conscious knowledge is applied only when sufficient processing time is available. There is at least suggestive evidence that subconscious "acquired" linguistic knowledge (that is, internalized before puberty) is involved in ordinary unmonitored speech, while consciously "learned" rules are available to the second-language speaker only as a monitor. (Author/DB)

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An Error Analysis of an Advanced Learner of ESL: The Importance of the Monitor

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We would like to report on one interesting finding in an error analysis we performed on an advanced learner of English as as second language: We discovered that our subject was able to self-correct nearly every error she made in casual speech.

Our project, like many error analyses, was intended to determine the ratio of interference to developmental errors (see e.g. Richards, 1971, Dulay and Burt, 1972). Since most studies of this sort have been done with beginning and intermediate learners (e.g. Taylor, 1975), it was of interest to use to examine errors produced by an advanced learner. Our subject was a woman, a native speaker of Chinese, in her 40's, who began to learn English in her late 20's when she immigrated to the United States. Five years ago she enrolled in college and recently graduated with an A average.

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No control over her linguistic production was attempted. Observers (native speakers of English) simply recorded her errors from utterances she produced in normal family living or in friendly conversational situations. Immediately after an utterance containing an error was recorded, it was presented to the subject. The data was gathered over a three week period and 80 errors were tabulated.

We were prevented from carrying out any meaningful analysis of the ratio of interference to developmental errors, as many of the

errors produced could not be unambiguously analyzed, that is, while they could be explained as due to the interference of a similar structure in Chinese, or as due to the absence of an analagous structure in Chinese, the literature also indicated that such errors were found in learners with other first language backrounds.

We were quite surprised to note, however, that our subject was able to correct nearly every error in the corpus (about 95%) when the errors were presented to her after their commission. In addition, in nearly every case she was able to describe the grammatical principle involved and violated. Another interesting finding was that for the most part the rules involved were simple, "first level" rules (e.g. third person singular ending, irregular past tense form, number agreement, use of 'much' with countable nouns, etc.).

The fact that the vast majority of errors were correctable by the subject suggests that she had a conscious knowledge of the rules but did not have time to apply this knowledge. Further evidence that this is the case is our observation that the subject is able to write a virtually error-free English (she was a student in an undergraduate class taught by one of us (S.K.)). In writing, and in careful speech, she is apparently able to utilize her conscious linguistic knowledge of English, while in casual speech she may be too rushed or preoccupied with the message to adjust her output.

If second language users are able to apply conscious rules when sufficient processing time is available, one can speculate that such conscious knowledge is applied <u>only</u> when sufficient processing time is available. There is at least suggestive evidence that subconscious <u>acquired</u> linguistic knowledge is involved in ordinary unmonitored speech,

while consciously learned rules as available only as a monitor. Labov (1970) has noted that when speakers are unable to monitor their output, earlier learned dialects become evidenced in their speech. He suggests that only acquired rules (those internalized before puberty) are truly stable, maintenance of later learned rules being done via monitoring.

Another indirect argument is based on the findings of Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1974) and Larsen Freeman (1975), who found a difficulty order for grammatical morphemes in adult ESL learners that was similar to that seen in children learning ESL (Dulay and Burt, 1973,1974) when a speech production test (The Bilingual Syntax Measure) was used. Tests allowing more processing time (Larsen Freeman, 1975), however, produced different and less consistent orderings. One could speculate that the more stressful oral test tapped the adults' "naturally" acquired system (uniform across learners)1, while Larsen Freeman's tests allowed consciously learned linguistic knowledge (more idiosyncratic) to intrude.

To summarize, we hypothesize that for adult second language learners, a significant proportion of errors are "correctable", indicating that conscious linguistic knowledge is not always available to the second language user in producing utterances. This conscious knowledge may act as a monitor, altering the output of the acquired system.[2]

1. Evidence that adults are able to acquire to at least some extent is summarized in Krashen (1975). See also Krashen and Seliger (1975) for a detailed analysis of language learning (as opposed to language acquisition).

2. Nathalie Bailey has pointed out to us that use of the monitor need not always be advantageous. Certain rules may be beyond the capacity of the monitor, but may have been subconsciously acquired. In such cases, avoiding the monitor may be desirable. We also thank Herbert Seliger for his comments on this paper.

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